

The British Reaction to the Conquest of Everest

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On June 1, 1953, the eve of Queen Elizabeth II's coronation, news reached London that the British expedition led by Colonel John Hunt had conquered Everest, the world's highest mountain. This British success coming as it did at a time of continuing economic decline and at a time when the empire was breaking up, was given extensive coverage in *The Times* which had a special correspondent accompanying the expedition.¹ While *The Times'* copyright privileges prevented other British dailies from direct reporting on the climb, the significance of the conquest was discussed in other periodicals. This article is a critical analysis of the response of the British press to the Everest climb in order to assess the ways in which this sporting triumph affected the self-image of the nation in the discouraging end of empire years.

While Britain's economic difficulties had been detectable as far back as the 1870's, the physical size and apparent economic usefulness of the empire had helped mask the decline from the British public and most politicians.² After 1945, the real weakness of Britain in terms of her economic and military capabilities became much more evident as an element in normal political discussion and debate. India and Pakistan had become independent in 1947 and throughout the empire from the Malay states to Kenya, local nationalist movements were challenging the moral and legal bases of British suzerainty. Britain's economy was now too weak to keep her in the ranks of first-class world power as she found herself increasingly incapable of supporting production and deployment of the new weaponry of the nuclear age.³ The imperial mantle in the western world was passing from Britain to the United States.⁴ As L.C.B. Seaman points out, the crisis of the Korean War confirmed the new American dominance and the British slide into second-rank status—for the first time since the Thirty Years War Britain was too weak to play an influential role.⁵

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Yet, in spite of these new realities, the empire and its mythology continued to give solace to British opinion-makers and hererin lies the fascination of the British reaction to Everest. The success of the British expedition was taken as a confirmation not only that the traditional values associated with empire were still valid, but that they could still keep Britain as a first-class power. The writers on Everest drew attention to the English characteristics that had achieved so much in the past—the stoicism, the gentlemanly reserve, the knack of dealing with “native” races. The reports also praised the organization and planning of the expedition and cited the technical aspects of the climb as proof that British inventiveness and scientific expertise were still second to none. The Everest climb enabled the British, for a fleeting moment in the summer and autumn months of 1953, to recapture the easy racial and technical superiority that had been taken for granted at the height of the Victorian empire.⁶

II

Coming as it did on the eve of the coronation, the conquest led to euphoric comparisons with the age of the first Elizabeth when Englishmen like Sir Francis Drake had laid the foundation for the vast overseas empire of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The *New York Times* editors believed that the felicitous coincidence of conquest and coronation would be “taken as a sign of a new Elizabethan age”⁷ and they were right. *The Times* of London linked the climb to the prospects of the new reign. On the morning of the coronation the center page was dominated by two headlines—on the one side “Thousands Spend Night On Coronation Route” and on the other, “Everest Conquered.” An editorial wrote of the “apt timing of the announcement of this great achievement on the eve of the coronation.”⁸ *Blackwoods Magazine* took the Elizabethan theme to greater lengths, describing the Everest success as “a Coronation gift for Her Majesty and a message to the world that strength and courage lived on in the British stock.” For those cynics who refused to see such a general significance to the climb, *Blackwoods* had sharp criticism. Such people showed no appreciation of the traditional values behind British success in the world. “The forbears of such carpers,” wrote *Blackwoods*, “may have asked the same question when Drake sailed round the world, when Cook made his voyages, when Scott, a few days after Amundsen, reached the South Pole. The list might be lengthened but we know the answer: the new Elizabethans gave it at the end of May.”⁹

With such views in the press pointing to a general historical significance for the climbing success, it is puzzling to read the “official” account of the expedition written by its leader, Colonel John Hunt, and published in October of 1953.¹⁰ *The Ascent of Everest*, particularly when placed in the context of contemporary press writings, seems very much of an anti-climax. It is an ordered narrative giving detailed descriptions of the planning and equipment, but de-

void of any grand statements that the climb had anything to do with Britain's position in the world. The American scholar, Steven Marcus, in an informed and thoughtful review essay, concluded that Hunt's book was yet another sign in the early 1950's of the erosion of Britain's imperial confidence. One of Marcus' main arguments is that Hunt's book revealed the extent to which the British in the post-1945 years were becoming increasingly "Americanized" as they sought to reaffirm national greatness by proving they could outdo Americans in the use of modern technique.

Hunt's expedition, wrote Marcus, "seems to have prided itself especially on those qualities of social of industrial organization, cooperation and 'team-work' which, in their most refined forms, have come to be appreciated as singularly American." The British were anxious to show that they were capable of emulating American technical and professional efficiency.¹¹ Marcus was struck by the way in which the book concentrated on this attribute of "professional efficiency" in "what used to be the characteristic domain of the British amateur." In adopting this approach Hunt, according to Marcus, revealed the extent to which older English values—such as pride in amateurism—had gone by the board. In the high-noon of empire, British successes in exploration and discovery—the search for the source of the Nile, Scott in the Antarctic—had been distinctively English. The men involved were adventurers but remained gentlemen untainted by professionalism. Marcus reminds us of Cherry-Gerrard, the sole survivor of the three men who made the dash to the pole with Scott, taking his samples of emperor penguin eggs to the Natural History Museum in South Kensington where he waited patiently in an ante-room for a receipt from the museum director. These Victorian and Edwardian explorers did not go to the ends of the earth to prove the empire was great. That was self-evident and accepted as naturally as daylight. The empire was based on industrial leadership, world trading strength and naval superiority and not on the transitory triumphs of Burtons, Spekes and Scotts. The exploration successes were not needed for confirmation of imperial greatness but were extra accolades, the icing on the imperial cake. Thus the stories of these earlier expeditions were full of, examples of personal courage and self-sacrifice, full of drama and ever mindful that the figure trudging towards Lake Victoria or struggling across the ice cap would in a few weeks be back in a London club or drawing room talking (if at all) self-deprecatingly about the little inconveniences an Englishman must put up with in wild parts of the earth. In contrast to this tradition, the Everest expedition was characterized by "grimness, the fierce engineering, the dehumanizing 'teamwork.'" ¹² In trying to prove themselves up-to-date, capable of keeping abreast of their competitors, the British, as epitomized in Hunt's book, showed that they had become imitators and followers rather than leaders secure in their own values and self-esteem.

The Marcus critique is a cogent one and must be dealt with before attempting

to make the case that the climb did in fact have a different and more traditional significance. In this context it is necessary to bear in mind the circumstances in which the book was written. The first point to make, one that Marcus himself acknowledges, is that Hunt did not find writing easy. He was a taciturn Army officer who approached the expedition in the same way he would have planned a military campaign. He wrote about it in a deliberately undramatic style as though composing an official report of army exercises. The second point is that it was written in a hurry. The Everest party returned to England on July 3 and the book was published in October. It had in fact been written in one month.¹³ Even if Hunt had been inclined to discuss broader issues or comment on what he might see as the wider significance of the climb for Britain, he barely had time to do so.

The third point is more complex and has to do with an unseemly public argument that developed shortly after the summit had been reached. The two climbers to reach the top were Edmund Hillary, the New Zealander, and Tensing Norquay, the Nepalese Sherpa. Both Nepal and India (where Tensing had lived for many years) claimed Tensing as a national hero. In both those countries a version of the final assault quickly became established to the effect that Tensing had led the rope and dragged an exhausted Hillary the last few feet to the summit.¹⁴ As the expedition marched back through the Nepalese valleys, the members of the party became increasingly disconcerted to see Tensing receive the lion's share of the attention. At the various villages where the climbers were welcomed, "the celebrations centered chiefly on the alluring figure of Tensing." That was bad enough but the case was more serious because

the Nepalese nationalists have been grotesquely exaggerating his contribution to the corporate victory over Everest. He is not only said to have preceeded Hillary to the summit (which, as it happens,—it is of little import—is untrue), he is variously alleged to have reached it first by six minutes and to have 'dragged' Hillary up the last 15 feet.¹⁵

Tensing, who was illiterate (as *The Times* knowingly pointed out), had "allegedly been persuaded to sign at least one statement in support of them [the claims of the nationalists]."¹⁶ This version of the conquest spread until many "organs of biased opinion" in India and Pakistan were "now implying that this final victory was Tensing's alone—that he cut the route, blazed the trail and finally hauled Hillary to the summit on a rope."¹⁷ The culmination of Tensing worship came when the expedition entered Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal. James Morris reported resentfully that "the return of the victorious British Everest Expedition to Kathmandu yesterday was turned into a triumphal procession for Tensing . . ." As the procession entered the town it was led by a flower-wreathed coach drawn by four horses and containing Hillary and Hunt as well as Tensing. "In this somewhat overcrowded state," continued the dispatch, "with the . . . garlanded and ruddy Tensing perched high

but with Colonel Hunt and Mr. Hillary only occasionally able to emerge from the depths of the seats to acknowledge the cheers and to get some air, the coach moved off through an almost impassable crowd.”¹⁸ As the coach made its way through the streets it passed beneath the decorated arches with symbolic paintings of Tensing “on top of the mountain planting with one hand a Nepalese flag and with the other hauling up an exhausted Hillary to join him on the summit.” Meanwhile, the other members of the expedition followed as best they could in a humble motor car. “No arrangements had been made,” Morris critically observed, “for any formal recognition whatever of the important parts they had played in what both Nepal and India regard as Tensing’s triumph.”¹⁹

As the celebrations continued in Kathmandu, the glorification of Tensing took on a sharper political edge and increased the misgivings of British observers. At one public meeting about forty speeches were made but “scarcely one gave any indication that any persons other than Tensing were present on Everest at the time of the ascent.” When the British ambassador held his reception, Tensing declined to attend on the grounds that he was sick, but as *The Times* pointed out, “far from being ‘sick’ Tensing was at the same hour holding a press conference which appears to have been inspired by a group of persons whose interest on the subject of Everest seems to be the possible political capital to be made out of the success.”²⁰

Although the Tensing affair subsided after the Kathmandu incidents, particularly once Tensing was persuaded to disassociate himself from the nationalists, the controversy remained evident in the background. On July 13 a Reuters dispatch reported that “the general council of Nepal’s National Democratic Party had recommended the renaming of Mt. Everest as ‘Tensing Peak.’ ”²¹ Back in Britain periodicals took a dim view of all these efforts to tarnish a British achievement. “All the more tedious and discordant,” ran an editorial praising the conquest, “is the reaction of certain people in India and Pakistan who begrudge the British even a share in the honour.” The writer criticized the nationalists as “mean and irrelevant” and insisted that the world knew it was Hillary, the white man, who had led the way to the top. Turning to cricket, that most English of games, for a metaphor, *Blackwoods* concluded that the conquest was a team effort and thereby implied that Asians found difficulty in grasping the higher values of the noble game. “To take any other point of view is about as reasonable as to credit a cricket match to a batsman who has made the winning hit. Anyone who entertains such an opinion can never have climbed a mountain higher than his own dunghill.”²² *The Times* described the controversy as a “political tragedy” and accused the nationalists of a “loss of perspective” over Tensing’s role thus introducing to the conquest celebrations “much unfortunate nationalistic and political feeling.”²³

Seen against this background, the tone of Hunt's book is much more understandable. The activities and claims of the nationalists had led to a "loss of perspective" about the role of one man. It therefore became important for Hunt to emphasize, even to the point of boredom, that the victory was the result of careful planning and teamwork. To have introduced drama and personalities would have rekindled and drawn attention to the awkward affair that had threatened to overwhelm the British success.²⁴ In his "final message" to the British public, Hunt had warned of "personal and national ambitions that may take an unhealthy share in the process to the detriment of the higher inspiration which mountains can evoke in those who climb them."²⁵ The muted approach taken by Hunt can be explained then in terms of these three factors—his taciturnity, the haste with which the book was written and the need to counteract the impressions and effects of the Tensing controversy.

But Hunt's book was not simply a response to the conditions of its writing. Its reception by British reviewers revealed that even as it stood it could be read as a vindication and proof of British superiority in a world run-over with petty, narrow and strident local nationalisms. The book was in fact a first-rate example of that old standby of empire, the stiff upper lip. Reviewing the book for the *Spectator*, Peter Fleming had high praise for Hunt's restrained approach. In contrast to other brands of nationalism that took every opportunity to blow their own trumpets, Hunt's was characteristically English by being modest and full of common sense. If the French or Americans had been the first to climb Everest the subsequent accounts would have been quite different from Hunt's gentleman-officer plainness. The French would have "indulged in flights of fancy", the Americans "would have bothered about their bowels." Both the French and Americans "would have been more nationalistic . . . more tricolour conscious. In their efforts to tell an immortal story worthily, both would have been more exclamatory, more dramatic, more intimate." Hunt in contrast had "sensible ideas about how to behave on Olympus." Fleming implied a parallel between classical Greek simplicity and the straightforwardness of British values in the modern world. "If civilization were destroyed overnight," he wrote, "and scholars in 2000 years had to sort out our achievements *The Ascent of Everest* would need the minimum of footnotes. It tells the truth in a convention (the question of style hardly arises in this context) which every age will recognize and every age respect."²⁶ Whereas the American scholar Marcus saw Hunt's book as a falling away from the traditions of Victorian and Edwardian explorers, Fleming viewed the book as belonging "to the sound Edwardian tradition of M. A. Cherry-Gerard's *The Worst Journey in the World*." Hunt's "manner throughout the book suggests that climbing Mt. Everest is a perfectly normal and sensible thing for men of the British Empire to do if they have the chance."²⁷

Such views as these suggest that the British public did not take the Hunt ac-

count as a sign of British decline and mimicry of the Americans. On the contrary, according to reviewers such as Fleming, the Everest story as told by Hunt was a confirmation that traditional values of reserve, self-effacement and common sense that had served Britain in the past, could still work in the 1950's.

III

Other writers and reviewers picked up on these and similar themes. For example, several pieces disagreed with the notion that the spirit of amateurism (taken to be typically English) had been lost. Even the reviewer in the *New Statesman & Nation* took a tinge of pride in this national trait. In an article reviewing literature on Everest expeditions since 1921, Janet Adam Smith drew attention to foreign criticism of British amateurism. Commenting on the account of the 1952 Swiss expedition, she detected "a whiff of that national resentment which climbers of other nations felt at the virtual British monopoly of the mountain before the war. Instead of the conventional tributes to predecessors there is some sharp criticism of individual expeditions: an implication that the British were too much amateurs, that success would have come on the Tibetan route to climbers who had really tried."²⁸ A more direct invocation to the tradition of amateurism was made by a member of the public in a letter to *The Times*. Francis Weiss, writing from Beckenham, Kent, pointed out that the British achievement was all the more remarkable because, unlike the Germans, Swiss, French and Americans who could practice on major snow peaks in their own countries, the British came from an island with no high mountains. "The British mountaineers," he noted, "were recruited mainly from a country where tobogganing on Hampstead Heath is regarded as a sporting performance by the English public." The conquest of Everest was directly linked by this writer to the traditions of the famous gentleman-climbers of Victorian England. "The conquest of Everest is the crowning glory of a long chain of wonderful mountaineering achievements by a people lacking mountains at home, a chain started by Sir A. Wills when he climbed the Wetterhorn and by such brilliant names as Tyndall, Whymper who inspired the whole world to become mountain minded."²⁹

The continuing vitality of this amateur tradition seemed confirmed by *The Times* reporting. When members of the expedition were formally presented to the King of Nepal in Kathmandu, Tensing went first and was followed by Hunt who had not had time to change his clothing. There he stood, the leader of the British conquerors, dressed in "khaki shorts, British army windproof jacket, fawn socks and 'gym' shoes."³⁰ On July 4, there was another reported example of eccentricity. "It appeared that all members of the expedition carried umbrellas up to 13,000 feet." Another piece included an old image of English amateurism—the gentlemanly intellectual roughing it philosophically

in primitive parts of the globe. In this case there was a description of how the climbers spent their spare time. You will find “the Englishman sitting in his tent on a Himalayan hillside reading perhaps (as is customary) the *Oxford Book of Greek Verse*.” When Mrs. Hunt met her husband on the return march from Everest, *The Times* reported that she kissed him and said “Well done darling.” A couple of months later when Hillary returned to New Zealand there was a huge crowd in Wellington to meet him. Hillary kissed his mother and clasped his father’s hand “while the crowd sang ‘For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow’ ”³¹ Hillary had projected a similar image on an earlier visit to Paris. When asked a question by French reporters (the implication was that such abstract questions were typical of the French) about his “psychological feelings on arriving at the top of the world,” Hillary “scored a considerable success when he listed his emotions as relief at having reached the summit, pleasure at having achieved the goal and a great desire to get down as quickly as possible.”³² The cumulative impact of these images and incidents as reported in the press reinforced the view that the British climbers, in spite of all the planning and technical aids, still retained an essentially amateur approach rather than being “grim faced” modern professionals. Climbing was only part of their lives, they were reserved, self-deprecatory and they read Greek poetry.

The invocation of the tradition of amateurism was given an additional dimension as writers saw in the Everest expedition a revival of the spirit of adventure which had allegedly played such an important role in building up Britain’s influence in the world. That concern about such intangible national traits was in the air can be seen from the Queen’s Christmas message for 1952. As she talked to the British “Commonwealth and Empire, that immense union of nations, with their homes set in all four comers of the earth,” she called for “new faith in old beliefs.” “Above all,” she continued, “we must keep alive that courageous spirit of adventure. That spirit which still flourishes in this old country and in all the younger countries of our Commonwealth.”³³ When the news of the conquest reached London, *The Times* picked up this atavistic theme. Under the heading “The Challenge of Everest,” one article harked back to the days of expansion. “Seldom since Francis Drake brought the Golden Hind to anchor in Plymouth Sound has a British explorer offered to his sovereign such a tribute of glory as Colonel John Hunt did.”³⁴ and his men were able to lay at the feet of Queen Elizabeth for her Coronation. A few days later the *Spectator* pursued the same theme, linking Everest to traditional virtues that had served Britain well in the past. “The central Elizabethan virtues,” wrote the *Spectator*, “were courage and enterprise. There is not the slightest sign that the creative energies of the British people are any less now than they have been in the past 400 years. All that is needed is the effort to apply them.”³⁵ On June 8 a long article described Everest’s sting as having been drawn “by as good a company of adventurers under as

skillful a captain as your Correspondent can ever expect to meet.”³⁶ A *Times* leader on June 2 expressed the view that “the splendid trophy brought from the world’s highest peak is the earnest of the hope of a new heroic age.”³⁷

The forward-looking element in that editorial shows that while taking pride in perceived national traits in a atavistic sense, writers believed these values to be useful in the contemporary world. Much of the writing on Everest was based on the assumption that since Britain had gone through an imperial experience that covered much of the earth’s surface, she was better equipped to deal effectively with the racial and nationalistic problems of the twentieth century. The successful transition from empire to commonwealth could be taken to show that Britain, with her exhaustive knowledge of the different parts of the globe, was capable of transcending the old Euro-centric past. This tone of optimistic assessment was captured in the Queen’s Christmas message for 1953. She talked of the

empire . . . from which there has arisen a world wide fellowship of nations, of a type never seen before. In that fellowship the United Kingdom is an equal partner with many other proud and independent nations, and she is leading yet other still backward nations to the same goal. Thus formed the Commonwealth bears no resemblance to the empires of the past. It is an entirely new conception, built on the highest qualities of the spirit of man . . . moving steadily towards greater harmony between its many creeds, colours and races . . .³⁸

This was soothing rhetoric to Britain in the early 1950’s for it enabled her to take pride in the granting of independence to colonies and at the same time justify delaying independence in cases where the local population was still considered to be “backward,” requiring more tutelage from paternal London before being allowed to go it alone. It made it possible for Britain to confirm the view that she was a beneficial rather than an exploitative imperial presence. This line of reasoning was followed in a *Times* editorial in July 1953. The article opened by quoting from a piece by John Ruskin in which England was described as “for all the world a source of light, a centre of peace . . . and amidst the cruel and clamorous jealousies of the nations, worshipped in her strange valour of goodwill towards men.” This led to a discussion of the meaning of Britain’s imperial past and its impact on her present role in world affairs. The editors focussed on Cecil Rhodes as an example of perverted imperial ideals:

The aggressive example of Rhodes’ whole record in the acquisition of financial and political authority, leading to the moral disaster of the Jameson Raid, in which historians may even yet see a turning point from the pacific nationalism of the 19th century to the lawlessness in high places that has marked the 20th century. And what havoc may be wrought in the name of a chosen race, believing itself appointed for the redemption of the world, has in very recent years been written across the ravaged face of Europe for all to see.³⁹

While the Queen and *The Times* talked complacently about British highmind-

ness, some politicians developed more specific theories on the subject of Britain's new posture. From the left wing of the Labour Party, John Strachey urged readers of the *Twentieth Century* to see that:

the principle of racial equality in its widest sense is the key to successful world policy for Britain. In three separate spheres, in the Far East, in the Middle East and in the dependent parts of the Commonwealth, there is no hope of the maintenance or re-assertion of British's position except upon the basis of a real recognition, in practice, of the basic equality of the status of human beings irrespective of their colour, creed or race.⁴⁰

Strachey went on to argue that the 1945-50 Labour government had salvaged Britain's position in Asia by recognizing before it was too late, the independence of India, Pakistan, Burma and Ceylon.⁴¹

At the same time as these views were being urged by Strachey with *The Times* adding two cheers in favour of a new racial tolerance, there were signs of contrary opinions in the British public at home and among British settlers in the remnants of the empire. Canon Collins insistently drew attention to these more ominous signs of the times. "In this country," he wrote, "there is still a vast amount of racial discrimination. Why are the Italians kept out of British mines? Why was there nearly a strike at Kings Cross station because a black man has been raised in status? Why is it that at Brixton today, scrawled across the walls of the streets, you can see the letters KBW—Keep Brixton White?"⁴² From the empire-commonwealth too, there are plenty of signs, even apart from the obvious ones like the Mau Mau incidents in Kenya, of rigid race attitudes, reflecting the old days when Englishmen considered themselves lords of humankind. In July 1952 there was a report of an affair in Kuala Lumpur, Malaya. Officials of a club had resigned over an incident which "involved the dignity of a Malay ruler," the issue being whether Asians should be admitted to the club. The club committee had been prepared "to welcome the ruler as a guest but objected to other Asians who had been invited—a qualification that in no way reduced the implied insult." European opinion in Kuala Lumpur was divided on the question, some believing it was unfortunate the affair had become public knowledge since "given time, all Europeans could recognize the change in status of their community, with all it implies socially as well as politically."⁴³ These press reports from 1952-53 suggest that the British position on race was ambivalent and transitional, trying to shed the lordly superior attitudes of a passing imperial age while arguing to the world that Britain's long and varied contact with differing races gave her more understanding than other countries of the modern race issue. But phrases in the Queen's message about "backward" countries, graffiti in Brixton and the club affair in Malay hinted that the transformation was more rhetorical than real.

It is against this background that the relationship of the Nepalese Sherpas to

the British Everest expedition can usefully be seen, for this was in microcosm a test case for the state of British racial attitudes, a practical laboratory that could assess how Englishmen in the 1950's got along with non-European races. British reporting on this issue revealed the curious mixture of attitudes that was typical of the time. On the one hand admiration for the way in which the British, with the minimum of fuss, handled the Sherpas with authoritarian paternalism, and the other hand, an insistence that the British treated the Sherpas as friends and equals. At the outset of the expedition some questions were raised in the press about the role of the "porters." The Sherpas were essential to the expedition's success yet one correspondent pointedly asked if anyone in the expedition spoke "some language intelligible to the porters."⁴⁴ In a reply intended to be reassuring, the United Kingdom representative of the Himalayan Club explained that although only one member of the expedition had local language knowledge (he was an officer in a Gurkha brigade), the leader and certain other members "have acquired a working knowledge of the Nepalese language."⁴⁵ Morris thought that relations with the Sherpas were excellent. On June 4 he reported that "relations between the climbers and the Sherpas are happier on this than any previous expedition, owing partly to the presence of Major Wylie, an experienced and affectionate Gurkha officer. Here at Base Camp your Correspondent amid his little band of wildish hillman, feels himself among the company of good and faithful friends." This last phrase captures the tone of much of the writing concerning the Sherpas. In talking about "wildish hillmen" who become "faithful friends," the piece is reminiscent of John Buchan's novels. The relationship is a good, healthy one, but there is a definite sense that it is so because each side knows its place. This nuance comes out in the rest of the reporting. The Sherpas are described as "a hardy hill race of Tibetan stock who are tough, intelligent, friendly and brave." The typical Sherpa was "smallish . . . but he is bred and weathered looking rather like a Toby jug. His face is brown but no more than a sunburnt Neapolitan's and is of a slightly Mongolian cast." His appearance, is "quaint yet functional."⁴⁶

The way in which the good relationship rested on a sense of proper place can be seen from other incidents reported. On June 11, for example, the work of these "good friends" was described. "In the coldest and bleakest places the sahib will find a steaming cup of tea awaiting him or a plate of hot roast potatoes with butter. Sometimes his Sherpa cook will have acquired and roasted a chicken."⁴⁷ After the summit party had returned to base camp and Hillary sat in the mess tent eating an omelette, "from time to time the flushed face of an excited Sherpa would appear through the tent door with a word of delight." The fully nuanced relationship is well illustrated when Tensing is involved for here was a member of the two-man summit team who had presumably proved that he was much more than a support member of the expedition. He had also served on previous expeditions and was "the most famous of the Sherpa por-

ters.”⁴⁸ In descriptions of him there are clear echoes of the noble savage theme. He is, wrote Morris, “obviously and indisputably one of Nature’s gentlemen. He has an inborn ease and elegance that would cause a flutter in many a London drawing-room.”⁴⁹ Once the controversy about who led the way to the top developed, the comments on Tensing while remaining friendly, put him firmly in his place. He was not the equivalent of a Swiss guide in the Alps whose superior knowledge and technique controlled the climb. He was, *The Times* thought it important to point out, “employed by the expedition not as a guide but as a sirdar [i.e. to be in charge of the porters]. He and Hillary took turns to cut a route but it was the latter who led the way to the summit.”⁵⁰ At a Kathmandu press conference Hunt emphasized that Tensing “although a full, gallant and much liked member of the expedition was in no sense a guide to the summit. It was Hillary who throughout the last 2½ hours of the assault picked the route and headed the rope.”⁵¹

One of the reasons for nationalist wrath at this period was an apparent slight of Tensing by Hunt when the British leader had said of Tensing that he was a good climber within the limits of his abilities.⁵² Once Tensing was persuaded to leave Nepal and India and accompany the expedition back to London, the placing of Tensing in a racial hierarchy became much simpler and could be done by saying nice things about him. In the midst of the Kathmandu affair it had been feared that Tensing might refuse to go to England.⁵³ But after talking things over with Hunt and Hillary and, according to press speculation, being persuaded by Pandit Nehru, the Prime Minister of India, Tensing agreed to go to London. On July 1 he issued a statement that was interestingly worded, perhaps reflecting the tone as well as the content of the advice he had been given. “I now feel,” he explained, “if I do not accompany the other members of the expedition to England I would be failing in my duty and sportsmanship.”⁵⁴

Once out of Nepal and India it was much more difficult for Tensing to be seen in a heroic mould. The reporting painted a picture of honest, valuable and primitive provincialism. When in the aircraft that flew the expedition towards Europe, Tensing, “saw the sea for the first time.” His wife was skeptical about the emptiness below them but she was “eventually convinced that there were no houses for 100 miles or so.” Tensing and his daughters, continued the report, “were enthralled from the start.”⁵⁵ When the expedition arrived in London to a rousing welcome, “Sherpa Tensing” was “always set in a place of honourable prominence.” But the message was clear that Tensing could not have worked in anything but a subordinate capacity, especially when he emerged from the aircraft proudly wearing two wrist watches. *The Times* described the scene:

Tensing, a small man of wiry build, appeared in a loose khaki shirt of homespun material, with

grey slacks; in one breast pocket he carried a fountain pen in readiness to sign autographs and on each wrist a watch was strapped.⁵⁶

“Why does he wear two watches,” Colonel Hunt was asked. “Because,” Hunt answered, “he was given two.”⁵⁷ In Nepal and India, Tensing was a national hero and some even urged that Mt. Everest be renamed in his honor. But in London he appeared as an outlandish figure, uncomprehendingly wearing two wrist watches. In the context of race attitudes at the time and seen against the background of *The Times* reporting on the Sherpas, the incident at London airport shows how tolerant the British were but also how easy it was for the former imperial masters to retain old distinctions.

IV

So far, the press reactions to the Everest success have shown on the one hand a faith in values perceived as traditionally English and on the other hand, a belief that Britain’s imperial past gave her a unique maturity of experience on fundamentally important matters such as race relations. But perhaps more interestingly, the conquest was seen as a confirmatory sign of British leadership in the scientific and technological fields. Marcus, in his critique of Hunt’s book, described pride in technical efficiency as mimicry of American values. This may be one element in the situation in the early 1950’s but the press reports suggest that in taking pride in technical “know-how” the British were looking to their own historical development as the world’s first, and for a long time dominant, industrial nation. Technical inventiveness had been an important factor in the success of the industrial revolution and for over a century after 1750, Britain had been the foremost industrial, engineering and scientific power. As Morris pointed out in *Farewell the Trumpets*, “technique had been the truest foundation of British power, and often the actual cause of Empire: Britain had truly been the workshop of the world, and the British Empire had eagerly seized upon each new product of technology. . . .”⁵⁸

This pre-eminence had been in question since the 1870’s but it was a slow process for the realities of world economic and industrial development to sink into the British self-perception. In the early 1950’s although periodicals like the *New Statesman and Nation* were warning that Britain was no longer a first-rate power, the more widespread view was to search for signs to convince Englishmen that the country still retained the old capacity for industrial innovation and leadership that had been theirs in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As proof of this continuing vitality, the success of the British in designing and building passenger aircraft was frequently referred to. It was a common belief in the early 1950’s that Britain was the world leader in the field of jet aircraft production. A correspondent to *The Times* wrote of “our present supremacy in the jet airliner world.”⁵⁹ A full page advertisement in

Country Life in June 1953 had a caption "Leading The World" and showed against the background of the newest tractor ploughing a field, the Comet, Swift, Javelin and Hunter jet aircraft. "Britain," proclaimed the text, "still leads in discovery and engineering achievements. In the air, Britain's designs have blazed a new trail of safety, speed and comfort and have brought fame to British engineers and industrialists."⁶⁰ At a time when the empire was collapsing, when there were serious questions about Britain's industrial competitiveness and doubts about her ability to remain a great power, the achievements in the aircraft industry were taken to show that British leadership could be maintained in the twentieth century. The conquest of Everest was used in the same way.

To understand how such conclusions could be drawn from a climbing expedition it is essential to grasp the nature of the Everest challenge. Everest was the world's highest mountain but it was not technically difficult to climb. Whether from the Tibetan side using the north ridge or from the Nepal side by way of the South Col, the final summit sections seemed to present no great obstacles. The problem was almost entirely one, of height, of somehow overcoming the lack of oxygen which made even easy climbing an impossible task for the exhausted climber. As C. K. Shipton explained in 1952 as he looked forward to the expedition in the following year, "it has long been recognized that the climbing of Everest is as much a physiological as a mountaineering problem."⁶¹ The unsolved problems posed by the lack of oxygen were the biggest challenge and in such circumstances the key to success lay in the equipment used by the climbers. Oxygen cylinders and breathing apparatus had to be made with materials that could withstand very cold temperatures and yet be extremely lightweight to avoid adding to the speed of exhaustion of the climber. "In all the history of adventure," wrote *The Times*, after the failure of the 1952 Swiss expedition, "there can have been few prizes quite so tantalizingly unattainable as the conquest of Everest, surrounded as it is by a kind of invisible barrier which perhaps only science can demolish."⁶² In his account of the climb, Hunt emphasized that scientific knowledge and its practical application had been critical factors. "The final assault," he explained, "has been accompanied by long and arduous training, by intense study in laboratories of the facts observed in action; by careful study on the part of the climbers themselves of the counsel science had to give; and the daily guidance of the specialists accompanying the party."⁶³ In short, Everest was regarded as a scientific and technical challenge.

Seen in this context the Everest triumph could be interpreted as a sign of British technical and scientific prowess. A direct link was made between Everest and the contemporary performance of British industry. *The Times* ran a piece on "The British Industries Contribution" to the conquest, pointing out that "more than one hundred British firms and about ten continental companies

supplied items of gear for the team.” Included in these firms were companies from the Lancashire textile industry (such as John Southworth & Sons of Manchester) which had for so long dominated world markets. As well as showing the adaptability of traditional sectors such as textiles, the Everest expedition also drew on the modern expertise of the British Nylon Spinners and the Pye communications group. A whole range of other items from British industry were “meticulously planned and prepared for the expedition.”⁶⁴ Two months after the conquest, at the International Autumn Trade Fair held at Vienna, the British display was dominated by the Everest success and how it confirmed the excellence of British industry. The center-piece was a model of the mountain and “all the other exhibits on the stand were of equipment and clothing similar to that used by the expedition and made by British firms.”⁶⁵

The success of British inventiveness on Everest was broadened into general assertions about the condition of Britain, particularly her industrial competitiveness. With the example of the aircraft industry in mind, contemporaries sought to convince themselves that British genius was still alive and flourishing. The basic structure was sound; all that was required was the continued application of traditional English values to the new circumstances. Prince Philip caught this assumption nicely when speaking to the Annual Luncheon of the National Union of Manufacturers in October 1953. Britain must exploit her “natural assets” he urged, by which the Prince meant the intellectual ingenuity that had sustained British economic and technical leadership in the past. “We must,” he continued:

exploit the wit of the scientist and the engineer who by their inventions start new industries. We must exploit the wit of the specialist and the expert who can improve methods of production and the materials. We must exploit the wit of the designer who can improve the product itself and its saleability. Finally, and probably most important, the coordinator who alone can bring together and make use of the ideas of the scientist, specialist and designer. The manager should be the great brain-picker, constantly on the look-out for new methods and new ideas.⁶⁶

Such ruminating on the British condition was common enough at the time and after the conquest, Everest became an additional ingredient. The *Spectator* editorial that had looked back to the first Elizabethan age when the central virtues were “courage and enterprize” linked Everest to other contemporary signs of British vitality:

A Nation that can still produce men who climb to the top of Everest, who give one example after another in Korea of the highest military virtue, and who invent and fly the best passenger aircraft in the world, is certainly not lacking in imagination and flair.

Like Prince Philip, the *Spectator* believed that leadership from within industry was crucial for a successful future. In the changed social structure of the 1950’s it was difficult to obtain concerted and disciplined national effort. “The old link,” explained the *Spectator*, “that enabled gentlemen to instruct

their retainers to die for them in battle, or nineteenth century industrial magnates to require their workmen to die for them more slowly in satanic mills, is broken. A new link must be forged between those who lead by merit of brains and inventive genius and those who translate leadership by hard work into national prosperity.⁶⁷ Seen in the context of these assessments of Britain's condition, the Everest success seemed to have a fairly basic significance. It apparently confirmed the power of British inventiveness that augured well for the future and Colonel Hunt's effective, efficient management of the expedition seemed to represent exactly that quality which Prince Philip and the *Spec-tator* believed so essential for achieving national prosperity.

V

All this was, of course, illusory. As Steven Marcus sensibly points out, nations that are sound of health have no need to "insist upon the empty symbols of greatness." The "slightly spurious excitement" over such feats as the climbing of Everest only shows that people find little to enthuse over in the basic structural well-being of the country.⁶⁸ Even within the climb itself there were points that should have given the British press pause for thought. As one letter-writer unkindly reminded the readers of *The Times*, the two climbers who reached the top were not even British. "Is it not known," asked Thomas Reugg with mock innocence, "where the two mountaineers of the British Expedition who reached the summit came from? Is it not from New Zealand and Nepal?"⁶⁹

But while conceding the illusory nature of the lessons drawn from the conquest, it remains reasonable to suggest that Everest was, for a time, important for the British self-image. Everest as a mountain had long had special meaning for Britain. It had, since 1841, when it had been named after Sir George Everest head of the Indian Survey, been considered a "British" mountain. Up to 1952 when the Swiss made an attempt, no other country had made a major assault whereas the British had been sending expeditions for thirty-two years. "This greatest of mountains," explained Hunt, "has a very particular place in the annals of British mountaineering."⁷⁰ By the 1950's British claims on Everest as in so many other fields, were being rudely challenged. The Swiss expedition of 1952 had come within a few hundred feet of the top, the French were planning an assault in 1954, and the Russians were alleged to have 150 climbers training in the Caucasus for a massive attack on Everest from the Tibetan side.⁷¹ The Chinese added to British discomfiture by criticizing the very naming of the mountain after "an imperial colonialist administrator."⁷² Everest for so long a British preserve tucked securely into a far corner of her imperial hinterland, had by 1952 become "an arena for international competition."⁷³ In a very real sense then, the British expedition was attempting to demonstrate and vindicate "British" abilities in the context of critical international opinion. Certainly the British were aware that this would probably be

their last chance to prove themselves on “their” mountain before being pushed aside by other nations. This competitive context helps explain (while it does not validate) the emotional British reaction as they saw in the conquest a host of things believed to be characteristically English. The spirit of amateurism, gentlemanly sportsmanship, the ability to deal with “backward” races and places, English reserve and common sense were some of the things Everest was supposed to confirm. But besides this atavistic pride, the British saw in Everest hope for the future, a sign that Britain had not lost the capacity for technical and scientific inventiveness and that she could produce managers who could efficiently put new knowledge in the paths of practical success.

Back in 1895 at the height of empire, a British climber A. F. Mummery, one of the great Victorian amateurs, was killed on Nanga Parbat in the Himalayas. Mummery had a reputation for being an adventurous climber who took grave risks. While some questioned his judgement, the memorial piece written in the *Alpine Journal* believed that this quality was curiously English and was significant beyond the confines of mountaineering. Following a review of his achievements in the Alps the memorialist went on:

So long as English rule abides in India, so long will those who from Gulmerg in fair Kashmir, behold in the far north the glittering dome and spires of Nanga Parbat relate, as they wonder at its beauty, ‘There Mummery was killed—the great climber!’

The *Alpine Journal* believed he was an example of values that had made Britain a great imperial power. “It will not be denied,” the *Journal* continued:

that the quality thus described, which may be called recklessness, is a quality essentially English. It is the quality which has made our race the pioneers of the world, which in naval warfare won for us the command of the sea, which by exploration and colonization has given the waste lands of the earth to Anglo-Saxon enterprise, and the loss of which, if we ever do lose it, will bring our leadership to an end. Whilst Englishmen possess this quality they will manifest it in their sport.⁷⁴

For a brief moment in 1953 the conquest of Everest enabled the British to experience some of that pride and assurance that came so easily in the days of the Victorian empire. In 1895 there had been some substances to such a self-image; by 1953 there were only shadows.

Notes

1. The correspondent was James Morris who later wrote (among other things) an evocative trilogy on the British empire—*Heaven’s Command: An Imperial Progress* (New York, 1974). *Pax Britannica: The Climax of an Empire* (London, 1968) and *Farewell the Trumpets: An Imperial Retreat* (London, 1978).

2. Bernard Porter, *The Lion’s Share. A Short History of British Imperialism, 1850-1970* (London, 1975). p. 354. “What the empire did do was to shield Britain against some of the consequences, and especially the economic consequences, of decline, like layers of warm clothing around an ailing body.”

3. An editorial in the *New Statesman and Nation* argued that Britain "can never again in strategic terms defend these islands alone, and economically we can never compete with either the Russian or American industrial potential." *New Statesman and Nation*. March 13, 1954. p. 304. As the title of the editorial ("Delusions of Grandeur") implied, the *New Statesman and Nation* believed these realities had not yet been accepted by Conservative Party policymakers.
4. W. R. Louis, *Imperialism at Bay 1941-1945: the United States and the Decolonization of the British Empire* (London, 1977).
5. L. C. B. Seamen, *Post Victorian Britain 1902-1951* (London, 1966). p. 486. Mr. Tom Wilschutz, who is investigating the British response to the Korean War, drew my attention to this reference.
6. The set of attitudes I have in mind here are those described in such books as V. G. Kiernan's. *Lords of Human Kind. European Attitudes to the Outside World in the Imperial Age* (London, 1969).
7. *New York Times*, June 4, 1953.
8. *The Times*, June 2, 1953.
9. *Blackwood's Magazine*, 274 (August 1953). p. 190.
10. John Hunt, *The Ascent of Everest* (London, 1953).
11. Steven Marcus, "Mt. Everest and the British National Spirit." in *Representations: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York, 1954). pp. 78-79.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 84.
13. Hunt, *Ascent of Everest*, p. x; *New Statesman and Nation*. November 21, 1953. p. 638-639.
14. *The Times*, June 22, 1953.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*, *The Times*, June 16, 1953.
18. *The Times*, June 22, 1953.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*
21. *The Times*, July 13, 1953.
22. *Blackwood's Magazine*, 274 (August, 1953), p. 190.
23. *The Times*, June 22, 1953.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *The Times*, July 2, 1953.
26. *Spectator*, November 20, 1953, 588-589. pp.
27. *Ibid.* p.589.
28. *New Statesman and Nation*, November 21, 1953, pp. 638-639.
29. *The Times* (Correspondence), June 8, 1953.
30. *The Times*, July, 1953; June 22, 1953.
31. *The Times*, June 22, 1953; June 16, 1953; August 10, 1953.
32. *The Times*, July 24, 1953.
33. *The Times*, December 27, 1952.
34. *The Times*, June 2, 1953.
35. *Spectator*, June 2, 1953, p. 718.
36. *The Times*, June 8, 1953.
37. *The Times*, June 22, 1953.
38. *The Times*, December 28, 1952.
39. *The Times*, July 4, 1953.
40. *Twentieth Century*, CLIII (January, 1953), pp. 7-13.
41. *Ibid.*

42. *The Times*. January 19, 1953.
43. *The Times*. July 10, 1952.
44. *The Times*, February 5, 1953.
45. *The Times*. February 10, 1953.
46. *The Times*. June 11, 1953. For John Buchan's views on race relations see Gertrude Himmelfarb. "John Buchan." in *Encounter*, September 1960. reprinted in her *Victorian Minds* (New York. 1968). pp. 249-272.
47. *The Times*. June 12, 1953.
48. *The Times*, June 2, 1953.
49. *The Times*, June 11, 1953.
50. *The Times*, June 16, 1953.
51. *Ibid*.
52. *The Times*, June 22, 1953.
53. *Ibid*.
54. *The Times*, July 1, 1953.
55. *The Times*, July 3, 1953.
56. *The Times*, July 4, 1953.
57. *Ibid*.
58. James Morris, *Farewell The Trumpets*, p. 344.
59. *The Times*, June 6, 1953.
60. *Country Life*, June 6, 1953, p. 1824.
61. *The Times*, April 8, 1952.
62. *The Times*, July 25, 1952.
63. *The Times*, June 2, 1953.
64. *The Times*, June 9, 1953.
65. *The Times*, August 26, 1953.
66. *Selected Speeches 1948-1955 by His Royal Highness The Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh* (London, 1957), p. 71.
67. *Spectator*, June 5, 1953, p. 718.
68. Marcus, "Mt. Everest and the British National Spirit," p. 81.
69. *The Times*, June 29, 1953. Such men, the correspondent pointed out, could not have been "recruited from those who toboggan on Hampstead Heath." However, the New Zealander, Hillary, could be considered to be a "Britisher" (as indeed he was described by the Prime Minister of New Zealand). *The Times*. June 2, 1953.
70. *The Times*, February 2, 1953.
71. *The Times*, April 19, 1952.
72. *The Times*, June 7, 1952, quoting the *Peking Peoples Daily*.
73. *Times Literary Supplement*, November 13, 1953, p. 729, reviewing Hunt's *Ascent of Everest*. The extent to which there was an international race on to conquer Everest can be judged by the fact that had the Swiss succeeded in 1952 the British attempt would have been called off. *The Times*, October 9, 1952.
74. *The Alpine Journal*, XVII (1894-95), pp. 566-568.